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## NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

### SOME MEDIAEVAL CASES OF BLOOD-RAIN

Twice in the *Iliad* Zeus sends a rain of blood as a portent of slaughter. Just before the third battle, he threw the Greeks into confusion,

κατὰ δ' ὑψόθεν ἦκεν ἑρσας  
αἵματι μυδαλέας ἐξ αἰθέρος, οὐνεκ' ἔμελλε  
πολλὰς ἰφθίμους κεφαλὰς Ἀϊδὶ προιάψειν (Λ 53-55).

Before the death of his son Sarpedon, Zeus

αἱματοέσσας δὲ ψιάδας κατέχευεν ἔραζε  
παῖδα φίλον τιμῶν (Π 459-60).

The same portent appears in a passage in Hesiod, perhaps borrowed from the second of the above passages.<sup>1</sup> Among other ominous showers, blood-rain is several times recorded by Livy, in each case falling only on a small space and regarded as a portent.<sup>2</sup> Pliny<sup>3</sup> and Cicero speak of such reports, but the latter, with his usual good sense, rejects the idea of blood and suggests that the color of the rain may be "ex aliqua contagione terrena."<sup>4</sup>

Cicero's suggestion appears to be right. Of various theories as to a terrestrial source for the coloring matter,<sup>5</sup> the most scientific is that in an

<sup>1</sup> Ἀσπὶς Ἡρακλέους 384-85; cf. Goettling's note.

<sup>2</sup> Book xxiv. 10; xxxiv. 45; xxxix. 46, 56; xl. 19. On the Roman cases cf. Franz Luterbacher, *Der Prodigien Glaube und Prodigienstil der Römer* (Burgdorf, 1904), pp. 17, 23, 49, 65.

<sup>3</sup> *Nat. Hist.* ii. 57.

<sup>4</sup> *De divinatione* ii. 27.

<sup>5</sup> It has been attributed to a reddish dust mingling with the rain (Köppen's note on the first passage in the *Iliad*; see his *Anmerkungen zu Homers Ilias*); to dust formed of cinnabar (Alexandre's note on the passage in Pliny, II, 57, Paris, 1827), or of red clay (Lemaire's note on Livy i. 31; Paris, 1822); to a small alga (F. A. Paley, *Epics of Hesiod*, London, 1861, p. 142); to a reddish juice said to be deposited on plants by certain insects (cf. the notes on the first Homeric passage by Köppen, Crusius, Dübner, and Owen; also the Ameis-Henze edition, *Erläuterungen*, on II 459, etc.). This last explanation is by no means favored by most of the ancient and mediaeval cases. The scholia on the Homeric passages (*Scholia in Iliadem*, ed. Dindorf and Maas, i. 374; iii. 457-58; iv. 131; v. 381) suggest that after great battles blood flows into the rivers, whence it is taken up into the clouds and descends in rain. The twelfth-century archbishop Eustathius gave much the same explanation (*Commentarii*, Leipzig, 1829, III, 336). Grey rains, but hardly red rains, are to be attributed sometimes to forest-fires; see Fred G. Plummer, *Forest Fires* (U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Forest Service, Bulletin 117), pp. 17, 21-22, who records a number of red rains in the nineteenth century.

elaborate article by Ehrenberg, in the *Abhandlungen* of the Berlin Academy,<sup>1</sup> who describes various showers of red rain and dust in the earlier part of the nineteenth century. He gives microscopic analyses of the colored matter, largely particles of various minute animal and vegetable forms. The reddish or yellowish dust so composed, mixing with water, gives the look of diluted blood. Whence the dust comes is not so clear, and Ehrenberg rejected the idea that it is from the Sahara Desert; it has even seemed to lack characteristic African forms.<sup>2</sup> He suggested that in various parts of the world it may be drawn by violent winds out of such places as dried swamps, and, after being carried long distances at a great height, descends in the rain.<sup>3</sup> He believed that study of the phenomenon may throw light on atmospheric currents. He also collected<sup>4</sup> from all kinds of sources, historical and legendary, a very large number of cases of bloody rain and of phenomena which he considered similar. Whatever we may think of some of his explanations and comments,<sup>5</sup> he certainly showed that the phenomenon has been exceedingly widespread.

In the course of reading in mediaeval texts the present writer has come upon many actual or legendary cases of blood-rain overlooked by Ehrenberg, which indicate greater frequency than he had shown, in northern and western Europe and in regions still more remote.<sup>6</sup> First I give in the chronological order of the supposed events certain cases in England and France, then in Ireland, then in Iceland.

Geoffrey of Monmouth,<sup>7</sup> writing about 1136, is telling of the happy reign of Rivallo, great-grandson of King Leir and grand-nephew of Queen Cordeilla: "In tempore ejus tribus diebus cecidit pluvia sanguinea, et muscarum affluentia: quibus moriebantur homines." This is supposed to be in

<sup>1</sup> *Passatstaub und Blutregen*, volume for 1847, pp. 269–460. The subject was also discussed by the physicist Chladni in his work on *Feuermeteore* (1819).

<sup>2</sup> Pp. 270, 434.

<sup>3</sup> Pp. 270, 437.

<sup>4</sup> Pp. 327–95.

<sup>5</sup> He suggested that various weighty events in history, beginning with the exodus of Israel from Egypt, had been affected by such portents (pp. 439–40).

<sup>6</sup> Exhaustiveness naturally would be almost unattainable, and I make no such claim. Cases might have been multiplied by including other phenomena which Ehrenberg considered similar. For example, the tears and sweat (sometimes bloody) reported by ancient writers as found on statues and altars of the gods (pp. 335, 338, 341, 345, 346) are paralleled by the bleeding, sweating, and weeping crucifix in the cathedral of Dublin in 1197 (see Roger of Hoveden, *Rolls Series*, 1871, IV, 30). The scriptural turning of water to blood (Exod. 4:9; 7:20–21; Rev. 8:8; 11:6) is paralleled in Gregory of Tours, *Hist. Eccles. Franc.* (Société de l'histoire de France), VIII, 25; on an island near Vannes in Brittany, about 585, a pond is said to have been turned to blood to the depth of an ell, and many dogs and birds came to drink from it. In Brittany later (1161) a famine is said to have been preceded by a blood-rain in the diocese of Dol; rills of blood ran from a fountain, and bread when cut shed blood in abundance (Dom Morice, *Hist. de Bret.*, II, 237).

<sup>7</sup> Ed. by San-Marte (Halle, 1854), p. 29; book II, chap. xvi.

England, some time after the foundation of Rome. Geoffrey enjoys a higher reputation for imagination than for credibility, but his words possibly may embalm a bit of genuine tradition. He clearly regards the rain as ominous.<sup>1</sup>

One of the seven manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*<sup>2</sup> has this entry: "An.DC.LXXXV. In this year there was a bloody rain in Britain. And milk and butter were turned to blood. And Lothere, king of Kent, died." This is not a contemporary record; the redaction and manuscript are much later than the year 685, and whence the information came no one can be sure.<sup>3</sup> Yet one is always inclined to believe the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. A connection may or may not be felt between the bloody rain and butter and the death of the Kentish king.<sup>4</sup>

Ralph Higden, a monk of St. Werberg's Abbey, Chester (died 1364), wrote a so-called *Polychronicon*,<sup>5</sup> a universal history from the creation to 1352, a work of little historical value, but interesting for "the view it affords of the historical, geographic, and scientific knowledge of the age in which it appeared."<sup>6</sup> Whatever the authenticity of the following information, Higden's comment is interesting: "Hoc anno [sc. 787] apparuit in vestibus Anglorum signum crucis mirabile, et sanguis de coelo in terram profluxit. Quod utrum advenierit in signum motionis<sup>7</sup> Jerosolimitanae post trescentos annos, tempore scilicet Willelmi Rufi, futurae, an potius ad correctionem gentis Angligenae, ut plagam Dacorum venturam formidarent,

<sup>1</sup> His notice appears, expanded, in various works founded on his *Historia*, such as Wace's *Roman de Brut* (ll. 2171-78), the *Flores Historiarum* (Rolls Ser., I, 58), and Holinshed's *Chronicles*, Shakespeare's chief historical source (II, 7). The raciest version is in Laȝamon's so-called *Brut* (about 1200, ed. Madden, I, 165-66), for which I quote Madden's very literal translation: "In the same time here came a strange token, such as before never came, nor never hitherto since. From heaven here came a marvellous flood; three days it rained blood, three days and three nights. That was exceeding great harm! When the rain was gone, here came another token anon. Here came black flies, and flew in men's eyes; in their mouth, in their nose, their lives went all to destruction; such multitude of flies here was that they ate the corn and the grass. Woe was all the folk that dwelt in the land! Thereafter came such a mortality that few here remained alive. Afterward here came an evil hap, that king Riwald died."

<sup>2</sup> Ed. Thorpe (Rolls Ser., 1861), I, 63, MS Cott. Domit. A, VIII.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Gross, *Sources and Literature of English History*, pp. 177-78.

<sup>4</sup> Mediaeval chroniclers are given to mentioning unusual occurrences, merely for their general interest. One of the best of them, Matthew Paris (*Chron. Maj.*, ed. Luard, Rolls Ser., 1872-83, II, 136), between accounts of two events in the episcopate and of an invasion of Epirus, tells of a sow at Liège that farrowed a little pig with a human face, and of a four-footed chick born to a hen. A churlish scribe or reader has written in the margin: "Impertinens sed verum."

<sup>5</sup> Rolls Ser., 1865-86, VI, 276-79.

<sup>6</sup> Gross, p. 289.

<sup>7</sup> I.e., expeditionis bellicae (Ducange). Ehrenberg has several instances of the apparition of crosses and the like on people's clothes (pp. 355 [perhaps the above case], 357, 362).

nos nihil temere definimus, sed Deo sua decreta committimus." The sign of the cross on the garments inevitably suggested the crusaders (med. Lat., *cruce-signati*) to a writer after the eleventh century; but clearly the natural interpretation of the bloody rain was a coming calamity like the Danish invasions. Higden had no doubt it meant something.

The valuable chronicle known by the name of Benedict of Peterborough<sup>1</sup> consists mostly of contemporary entries, from 1170 into the reign of Richard I. On June 19, 1177, it records a bloody rain in the Isle of Wight: "Interim, die Dominica clausi Pentecosten, scilicet decimo tertio kalendas Julii, et festo Sanctorum Gervasii et Prothasii martyrum, sanguineus imber cecidit in insula de With, fere per duas horas integras; ita quod linei panni, qui per sepes suspensi fuerant ad siccandum, sic rore illo sanguineo aspersi fuerant, ac si mersi essent in vase aliquo sanguine pleno."

A very portentous case happened to Richard I in May, 1198, while he was superintending the building of Château Gaillard, by which he meant to guard the borders of Normandy; it is described in the last paragraph of William of Newburgh's contemporary and highly valuable chronicle:<sup>2</sup> A prodigy is said to have happened. Some persons of station who say they were present declare that while the king was urging on the work, as he often did, taking great pleasure in its progress, "repente imber sanguine mixtus descendit, stupentibus cum ipso rege cunctis qui aderant: cum et in suis vestibus veri sanguinis guttas conspicerent, et rem tam insolitam malum portendere formidarent. Verum ex hoc idem rex non est territus, quo minus operi promovendo intenderet, in quo sibi, ni fallor, ita complacebat, ut etiam si angelus de coelo id omittendum suaderet, anathema illi esset."

In the most reliable part of the chronicle of Walter of Coventry,<sup>3</sup> based on another nearly contemporary chronicle, under the year 1212, we read: "Apud Cadomum (sc. Caen) in Normannia visus [est] sanguis pluuisse vi<sup>a</sup>. idus Julii, feria vi<sup>a</sup>. Eodem die apud Faleise visae sunt [tres] cruces adinvicem in aere quasi pugnare." Possibly there is significance in the position of the notice, between references to the tragic "Children's Crusade" and to the interdict placed on England by Pope Innocent III.

The continuator of Knighton's chronicle,<sup>4</sup> writing about the time of the events in question (1387), says: "Et XIII<sup>o</sup>. mensis Octobris in comitatu Derbeyae apparuit quaedam nubecula quasi hora sexta, ut dicebatur, et pluit sanguinem ad spatium quantum est jactus sagittae in circuitu."

The *Book of Leinster* contains disjointed historical notes, written in Irish in the twelfth century. Among them prodigies befalling in Ireland

<sup>1</sup> Bishop Stubbs, Rolls Ser., 1867, I, 177.

<sup>2</sup> Ed. Howlett, Rolls Ser., 1885, p. 500; also independently in the reliable chronicle of Ralph of Diceto (ed. Stubbs, Rolls Ser., 1876, II, 162).

<sup>3</sup> Compiled 1293-1307 (Gross, p. 278); ed. Stubbs (Rolls Ser., 1872-73), II, 205.

<sup>4</sup> Ed. Lumby (Rolls Ser., 1889-95), II, 241.

are often mentioned, including showers of silver, honey, and wheat; also this in the year 868: "Showers of blood were poured, and the clots of gore were found."<sup>1</sup> The preceding entry is on the Battle of Killineer in the same year. According to the valuable *Chronicum Scotorum*, which, however, contains much legendary material in its earlier part, in the year 878 "it rained a shower of blood, which was found in lumps of gore and blood on all the plains in Ciannachta, at Dumha-na-n Deisi especially," followed by other prodigies.<sup>2</sup>

Another case near Ireland is in the Icelandic *Brennu-Njáls saga*,<sup>3</sup> chap. clvi, shortly before the Battle of Clontarf, near Dublin, in 1014. Brian and Malachy II, kings of Erin, are warring against the Danes of Leinster, who seek the aid of their countrymen elsewhere, including the vikings Bróðir and Óspakr, who are off the Isle of Man. Before they go there are great prodigies: "There was one night when Bróðir's men heard a great noise, so that they all awoke and started up and got into their clothes. Therewith it rained boiling-hot blood upon them. Then they sheltered themselves with their shields, but many were burned; that marvel lasted till broad day; one man had died on each ship." Other prodigies followed. Óspakr is so impressed that he goes over to the Irish side. The editor says the whole passage is legendary, perhaps because the incident is not mentioned in another Norse version nor in the Irish accounts of the war.<sup>4</sup> At the beginning of the *Darraðar-ljóð*, which occurs a little later in the same saga, but in a different connection, a rain of blood is spoken of as a portent of slaughter.<sup>5</sup>

An interesting case is in the *Eyrbyggja Saga*, written in the thirteenth century and founded on much earlier oral tradition. The following event is given as occurring in the extreme west of Iceland in the year 1001, the year after Christianity was introduced: While Þorod and his household are making hay, three hours after noon a small cloud comes swiftly up and rain

<sup>1</sup> Edited and translated by Whitley Stokes, in the volume with the *Tripartite Life of St. Patrick* (Rolls Ser., 1887), II, 520-21. Our author does not say which kind of shower was due to Home Rule.

<sup>2</sup> Rolls Ser., 1866, pp. 166-67. The early Druids were believed to be able to bring down fiery and bloody rain.

<sup>3</sup> Edited by Finnur Jónsson (Halle, 1908, *Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek*, XIII).

<sup>4</sup> *Annals of Loch Cé*, and *War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill* (both in the Rolls Series); *Aarbøger for Nordisk Oldkyndighed*, 1904, pp. 161-62.

<sup>5</sup> Vít es orpet  
fyr valfalle  
rifs reipeský,  
rignér blóþe.

—*Saga-Bibliothek*, XIII, 413.

A similar prodigy is mentioned in chap. clvii of the same saga: "In Iceland at Svínafell came blood on the priest's mass-vestment on Good Friday."

falls. When it clears they see that it has rained blood, which dries off all the hay except that raked by Borgunna, a woman lately come from the British Isles. The blood has fallen only at that place, and she declares that it bodes death for some one of them. She removes her bloodied clothes, takes to her bed, and dies in a few days. Because her will is not duly executed, she and other spectres walk, but are laid by holy-water and masses.<sup>1</sup>

These accounts agree well with the classical examples. Sometimes the rain seems to last a long, sometimes a short, time. Sometimes it is seen to cover only a small area, which may be due to the fact that a slight coloring would be only occasionally noticed, and only against a light background, such as people's clothes, as in several of the cases. Often or usually the rain is felt as very portentous,<sup>2</sup> but characteristically of the Christian Middle Ages perhaps as not quite the same immediate sign of divine power as among the believers in nature-religions. Some of these mediaeval cases are clearly historical, and some seem to be legendary; a later imagination may have created a portent for a portentous time.

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#### AN INTERPRETATION OF TIBULLUS ii. 6. 8

quod si militibus parces, erit hic quoque miles,  
ipse levem galea qui sibi portet aquam.

In reading this distich one at first thinks simply of the soldier's use of his helmet as a drinking-cup, as in Prop. iii. 12. 8; Claud. *De Bello Getico* 532 and III *Cons. Honor.* 49; Lucan ix. 498 ff.; *Eleg. in Maec.* 58; Quintus Curtius v. 13. 24; Stat. *Theb.* iii. 663, and Frontinus *Strat.* i. 77. But in Tibullus all good MSS read *portare*. We have not *potare* as in Propertius, nor have we any right to assume that *portare* here means simply "carry to the lips." Its real import is touched on by Dissen alone: "cogitandus est secum portans in itinere aquam miles galea pendente in pectore."

The helmet is not only the soldier's cup; it serves at times as a receptacle for lots (cf. Virg. *Aen.* v. 490-91). And, as here the soldier bears water in it, so in Suet. *Caligula* 46 it is used to carry shells.

The soldier would of course carry water with him in his helmet only owing to a lack of it in the country through which he marches; he may be going through a desert, or it may be during the summer heat. This intensi-

<sup>1</sup> Ed. Gering, *Saga-Bibliothek* (Halle, 1897), VI, chap. li. We cannot tell whether there was an eruption of Mount Hekla in that year, the earliest on record being in 1104; but Ehrenberg believed blood-rain to be unconnected with either volcanic or cosmic dust. In the above passage the little cloud and the small space covered recall the case quoted from Knighton.

<sup>2</sup> Showers of blood in Germany, among other prodigies, were thought to presage the Black Death of 1348-49 (Mackinnon, *Life of Edward III*, pp. 363-64).